DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 545 CS 014 511

AUTHOR Forde, Jan; Weinberger, Jo
TITLE Developing a Storysack Project within a Sure Start Initiative: Reflections and Emerging Findings on Working Together with Parents To Produce a Community Resource.
PUB DATE 2001-07-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the United Kingdom Reading Association (37th, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom, July 6-8, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; Community Involvement; *Community Programs; Foreign Countries; *Parent Participation; Preschool Education; *Reading Materials
IDENTIFIERS *England

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a community project to develop "storysacks" within an area of identified economic and social need. (Storysacks are books sent home for preschool children in England to share with their parents on a regular basis; each sack contains a fiction book, a nonfiction book linked to the story, and a wide variety of props which bring stories alive for children and help them learn through play.) The paper offers an overall outline of the project to date and plans for the future. It is an interim report written by the community teacher who has been centrally involved in the work and an independent researcher, in consultation with those involved in the project. Its aim is to document work on the project so far, identify lessons being learned, and present emerging findings. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 458 545

Developing a Storysack Project within a Sure Start Initiative: Reflections and Emerging Findings on Working Together with Parents to Produce a Community Resource

By

Jan Forde and Jo Weinberger

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the United Kingdom Reading Association (37th, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom, July 6-8, 2001)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Weinberger

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

CS 014 511

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

2

Paper for presentation at the United Kingdom Reading Association Conference
Canterbury, July 2001

Developing a storysack project within a Sure Start initiative: reflections and emerging findings on working together with parents to produce a community resource.

Jan Forde, Sheffield Young Children's Service/ NCH/ Foxhill & Parson Cross Sure Start and Jo Weinberger, University of Sheffield.

Introduction

This paper explores a community project to develop storysacks within an area of identified economic and social need. It offers an overall outline of the project to date and plans for the future. It is an interim report written by the community teacher who has been centrally involved in the work and an independent researcher, in consultation with those involved with the project. The work has not always been straightforward, as community projects involving a large number of people are always subject to change and often have a momentum of their own. We aim to document work on the project so far, identify lessons being learnt and present emerging findings.

Storysacks and related work: a research context

Work on storysacks over the last few years has similarities with work on involving parents in children's reading in the 1970s and '80s, whereby teachers in a large number of schools began to send home books for children to share with their parents on a regular basis. Apart from a handful of research projects (Hannon, 1995), little of this work was monitored or evaluated, and it was thus hard to establish a clear picture of what was happening on the ground. Now we have an initiative, which has been built on the work of a former headteacher, Neil Griffiths, who initiated the idea of storysacks and has disseminated his work widely, with the support of the Basic Skills Agency. Griffiths' original intervention was a school initiative (Poulson et al., 1997). There have since been innumerable schemes within schools, libraries, factories and other settings all over the country to develop and loan storysacks, but although the work has now been taken up in a large number of settings, just as in the previous work, it is hard to establish exactly what is happening where, and to what effect.

While storysacks have been widely used, (and adapted, for example, in 'Curiosity Kits' and 'Media Boxes') to date nothing substantial about the work around storysacks themselves has been published and the only documentation publicly available has been in brief reports, e.g. Boots initiative, ROWA!, Darlington Storysack Initiative, Southampton City Libraries, Harlow storysacks project, or short anecdotal accounts. We aim to offer a documented account to enable practitioners, policy makers and researchers to gain a clearer picture of the issues and possibilities.

Context of the storysacks project

This storysacks project developed within the Foxhill and Parson Cross Sure Start programme was the first Sure Start initiative to be set up in Sheffield. Established in 1999 as a 'trailblazer' programme, it provides comprehensive, multi-agency support to all families with children aged three or under. Its lead organisation, NCH Action for Children, is responsible for delivering the programme. Foxhill and Parson Cross, in the north east of Sheffield, is an area with mainly council owned housing, often in a poor state of repair and lacking modern day essentials such as central heating. According to ward level data the area is among the most deprived in the country, with high unemployment, poor health, high numbers of teenage pregnancies and speech and language skills in young children well below the national average.

The aim of Sure Start nationally is to work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children, particularly those who are disadvantaged to ensure they are ready to thrive when they get to school by:

1. ***Improving social and emotional development***

By supporting early bonding between parents and their children, helping families to function through early intervention and support of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

2. ***Improving health***

By supporting parents in caring for their children to promote healthy development before and after birth

3. Improving the ability to learn

By encouraging stimulating and enjoyable play, improving language skills, and, through early identification and support of children with learning difficulties

4. Strengthening families and communities

By enhancing families' opportunities for involvement in the community, and improving the sensitivity of existing services to local needs.

(www.surestart.gov.uk/home)

The storysacks project reflects the essence of what Sure Start is about with its emphasis on local people and their children and the collaboration of paraprofessionals, professionals and parents to produce a community-based resource for very young children. Its main focus is the target on improving children's ability to learn, but because of the nature of the project, it encompasses aspects of other Sure Start targets. For example, supporting bonding and enhancing families' opportunities for involvement in the community sit comfortably within the storysack initiative.

In establishing the project, emphasis was placed on finding collaborative ways of working with parents and other pre-school providers in the area (local education authority nursery schools, private and voluntary nurseries, playgroups and toddler groups plus Sure Start workers themselves) in order to meet Sure Start targets for language, that 90% of children should have normal speech by 18 months and 3 years of age by March 2001/2002 and for access to play facilities, that 100% of children to have access to high quality play and learning opportunities.

Key to these targets is the principle that early intervention involving parents, who are children's first and most enduring educators, can have continued benefits throughout childhood and adolescence and that children learn best in situations which are meaningful to them. Through play children are able to explore ideas, feelings and relationships. The development of social skills and the commitment to the learning community as opposed to formal academic preparation for school is of most benefit for preschool children (Sylva, 2000).

Development of the storysacks project

The project has three clearly distinct stages. The first stage has been concerned with establishing parents' groups to produce the sacks and to enable parents to work towards accreditation. The second is concerned with the continuation of the groups to complete 15 or more sacks. The third stage will focus on maintaining the sacks, training people to use them and the operation of the loan system. This paper mainly concerns the first stage of the project but some reference will be made to the second.

The project began like so many community initiatives with a few people, an idea and access to funding – in this case from Sure Start, and developed with a momentum of its own. Storysacks themselves are an attractive commodity with a direct appeal for parents. To date, six parents groups from local schools and nurseries have been involved in the initiative. By the end of July 2001, 90 sacks will have been produced, mostly hand-made, and a further 45 are planned giving a total of 135. It is estimated that over 800 children aged three and under will have the potential to use the storysacks.

The work originated from local interest coinciding with input from the recently appointed community teacher. The teacher provided a series of workshops on literacy and numeracy for reception parents in a local primary school, and showed a storysack by way of illustration. The parents wondered if they could make one for school. The reception teacher herself was already involved in making storysacks, recognised it would be a good idea to involve parents. In another primary school, the nursery teacher was also keen to have storysacks as a resource and to see the parents involved in producing and maintaining the sacks. The community teacher then approached other teachers in local primary schools and nurseries in the Sure Start area to ascertain the level of interest in producing storysacks with parents. One teacher who already had extensive experience of developing work on children's literacy with parents was very keen on the idea of making storysacks with parents. A couple of other teachers saw it as an innovative way of taking forward their own work with parents as partners. In the autumn term 2000, with the community teacher's support a group of parents at the NCH/Sure Start Family Centre established a further storysack making group giving Sure Start its sixth storysack group. This group received additional support from a local family learning development worker. The project overall was co-ordinated by the community teacher with a story sack support worker to help

facilitate the groups. Unfortunately, this worker was absent for several months and the community teacher had to continue supporting the groups within the limitations of her workload. Eventually, a parent from one of the storysack groups was appointed on a temporary basis to support the most vulnerable of the groups on a weekly basis, working alongside the school's home school liaison worker.

Funding for the initial 15 sacks in each group was obtained through the Sure Start Community Chest (an initiative to distribute funds to community based projects). Each of the six groups had £1,066 to fund crèche, books, resources and on costs such as refreshments and travel expenses. This money was distributed to schools to reimburse parents for any outlay of materials and items purchased for use in the storysacks. The schools were responsible for the making, buying, storing, and monitoring and took on overall responsibility for the sacks.

At the outset levels of enthusiasm for the project idea were high among the teachers in the various settings and they approached parents to form groups. This was done in a variety of ways, by direct approach, letter, and through general notices. Word of mouth, with teachers building on their existing relationships with parents, was the most effective method of recruitment. The parents were offered a free Open College Network (OCN) accredited course in storysack making by the Sheffield Community Enterprise Development Unit (SCEDU) in conjunction with Rotherham College of Arts and Technology. The OCN courses consisted of 20 learning hours delivered over 8 to 10 weeks in 2 to 2 ½ hourly sessions with each group producing one accredited sack. On average 12 parents in each school registered an interest, which was deemed good in an area where there is little culture of parents attending school activities. The community teacher chaired initial parent meetings and demonstrated the composition, use and value of a storysack while someone responsible for the OCN accreditation outlined the course. The National Storysack Support video was shown and whenever possible, teachers attended these initial meetings. Later open meetings gave the opportunity to share good practice and will eventually help to monitor the use of the sacks.

Storysacks – a quality resource

Quality and safety are both extremely important. Safety issues are paramount where equipment is going into people's homes, for instance laminated games have their corners rounded and soft toys carry the official safety mark. Each sack contains a

fiction book, a non-fiction book linked to the story and a wide variety of props which bring stories alive for children and help them learn through play. Props include scenery, a toy or puppet of the main character, different objects or artefacts related to the story, an audiotape, a video and games to play linked to the story. Prompt cards give parents and other adults further ideas for using the materials. Non fiction books link with the research showing boys' interest in non fiction (e.g. Frater, 2000) and the use of those including real photographs links with very young children's interest in looking at photographs. A 'magic'writing board has also been included, to provide a safe opportunity for children's mark making. In addition, storysacks, through offering a concrete task and clear purpose, have provided a focus for discussion about a wide range of educational and childcare issues within the groups (see also Anning and Edwards, 1999). This recognises the importance of the parents' role within the educational process, in contrast to expecting them to be solely the recipients of knowledge from experts, thereby minimising and marginalising their own contribution.

The sacks themselves are of a fairly standard size and are made with materials and embellishments which reflect the central story book. The parents assumed responsibility for what they felt confident to do. Some chose to knit, make games, buy resources, make tapes, laminate, write prompt cards and contents lists on the computer, make tea and coffee and supervise tidying away. All six groups opted to make the majority of sacks themselves as they felt the commercial ones were less stimulating in their range. This meant the whole project slowed down as parents began to make more and more imaginative and often innovative resources themselves. Resources were made at weekly meetings of the groups, although some members preferred to work at home due to work or family commitments. Some work went to other members of the family and community.

Once complete, the sacks will be centrally based to be used as resources in the various settings where they have been produced. To make this run smoothly, each setting has its own discrete geographical area within the Sure Start area. On average 140 children aged three and under live in each of these areas. The sacks will be available for use by parents and children in the home, teachers, Sure Start play and outreach workers, and a wide variety of workers and other

professionals in each area including nursery staff in the private and voluntary sector, librarians, toddler groups, playgroups, childminders, health visitors and speech and language therapists.

The community teacher has provided some training in storysack use, storytelling and developing the language of young children but much of this work remains to be done in the third phase of the project. Once parents have joined the storysacks 'libraries' in their settings, parent-friendly workshops on using storysacks and the storysacks 'library' will be provided. It is hoped parents themselves will be funded by Sure Start to operate the loan system on a rota system.

Implementing the project

Each group approached the project in approximately the same way. Following talks with staff and an initial meeting with the community teacher and SCEDU tutor, dates were set for the start of the accredited course and parents' rooms booked where possible. Schools without parents' rooms provided use of a staff room, 'quiet room' or library space. The community teacher held a second meeting to discuss and choose the first five books to be used as a basis for the storysacks. These were then bought by the teachers who also purchased or provided sewing, writing, and collage materials. Laminating, photocopying and computer work has been supported by the schools. The teachers then played a supporting role in subsequent books chosen. Once the accredited course began groups concentrated on producing one sack, writing diaries and developing their own lifelong learning skills. As the courses came to an end, the majority of the parents continued working in the storysack groups and a few new volunteers were found. Average attendance continued to run at between five and eight parents per session. For the accredited work, the quality achieved by the parents was particularly striking, and all forty parents in the initial five groups who submitted their work for accreditation gained level 2 for their portfolios of work.

Emerging issues

The project has been documented from the early stage of establishing the groups. Interviews have been carried out with parents and the support worker and there has been regular consultation between the community teacher and the researcher. This process has made visible the emerging issues discussed here.

While there were different implementation issues in each of the different settings, those that stood out as general problems included organising access to money, in some cases constantly changing group locations and lack of parents' rooms and lack of crèche facilities or storage and space. The level of support in the nursery or school setting and the sense of being valued were also important. In most settings there were staff changes, which could be disruptive, and there was an issue of maintaining the momentum, particularly after the accreditation stage. A wide variety of other workers supported the groups at various times including teachers, home school link workers, family learning development workers and story sack tutors. Their often transient roles and varying commitments to their wider jobs impacted on both the quality of the sacks and the commitment or 'job' satisfaction of some parents involved in the project. Staffing, accommodation, crèche facilities and parental motivation and skills all impacted on one another and varied considerably from one setting to another. The groups where there were adequate and consistent staffing, premises and crèche facilities, were the most successful *and* satisfying for all parties involved. In one case the group disbanded at the end of the first phase, the others continued with the most consistent being the most well established. In terms of gaining the accreditation, there was some inconsistency of tutor input which affected attendance and motivation. In some cases parents' lack of basic skills led to the need for greater support. The number of core members of the groups tended to be small, but remained workable in all but one setting. In practical terms, there was a need for expensive art and craft items to be centrally resourced.

On the positive side, there were many advantages to the storysack work. As a commodity, storysacks are fun, interactive, attractive, popular and a powerful learning tool for children. Through work on making and assembling them, they have enhanced parent's lifelong learning and in some cases developed parents' basic skills, offered qualifications for parents and provided family learning opportunities. Parents' confidence and self esteem has been raised, which in some cases has lead parents into further training, including opportunities for parents to cascade knowledge to new groups. There is the potential for using the sacks with special needs children and for a wider age range. They offer the potential for collaboration with schools and links with private and voluntary sector. There are opportunities within the work for

professional and paraprofessional development, and the end product of the sacks will provide a resource for outreach workers, parents and children.

Participants' views

The evaluation of the project began by documenting the project development and implementation. This has been reported above. Of great importance, however, are participants' views. Two participants were therefore selected at random from each of the initial five settings after the completion of the first phase, and interviewed about their views of the project. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, except in one case, where for convenience it was undertaken in one of the centres. All but one of the participants approached agreed to be interviewed and welcomed the interviewer into their home. One parent declined to be interviewed, because she said as she had not attended all the sessions, she did not feel in a good position to make comments. In this case another person again randomly selected from the same setting was approached and agreed to take part. In all cases but two the participants was a mother. There was also one father and one aunt.

A key feature was the way the work had enhanced the parents' own confidence and self esteem. Many made comments such as,

> It's given me a little bit more confidence to actually go, go back out....And it's nice to know that I can. I am still capable of doing something.

> I think it's made me think about sort of starting to study again...And I think it does improve your confidence.

> ....It's an achievement, do you know when you see people's faces when they see what you've made and that. It's like a buzz ...I've never done anything like that apart from with my own children ...but to say ...how many children there's going to be benefiting from one little sack ... I think it's quite an achievement.

The social aspect has been a central feature of the work and has provided an opportunity for parents to interact with one another and has offered a sense of social cohesion, saying for instance,

> Meeting other people really – other mums and getting involved, knowing that the kids would get something at the end of it as well and knowing that you can always tell anyone, if you see it, oh I did a part of that, you know, I've sort of, you know, put something into that.

> … through school it's nice – cause Kirsty's only just in reception, so I didn't really know many of the mums so it's got me to know more mums as well.

A sense of doing something worthwhile and making a contribution was an important dimension that some of the parents mentioned, for instance,

> I just wanted to put something back into, you know, the nursery helped me with my kids so I thought well it's a way of giving it back to the school.

> … it felt good cause like it felt like involved in something for school and doing something for the kids.

The parents spent many hours discussing the learning potential and also the safety aspects of the contents they collectively chose, assembled and made together to include in the sacks. Their comments included,

> …the sack can get used continuously – it will be there forever until they grow out of it. It'll be like a fun way of learning for schools and for the children … even if children are disabled and hard of hearing and things like this they still can use them.

> … you've got to think of safety aspects of it and other aspects cause they can easy bite on it or something like that – you don't want them choking on it or poisoning themselves on it.

It's opened my eyes as to what you can get out of one book.

Finally, when parents collaborate in this way to make storysacks, their enhanced confidence can lead to further developments. Two parents are now OCN storysack making tutors themselves and many more are enrolling on further childcare courses and IT training. Several parents have shown their work to new groups forming in the area and have also taken part in a family literacy conference at the University of Sheffield.

Conclusion

The evaluation is ongoing and adaptive to the changing circumstances of an organically developing community initiative. This is a dynamic and fast moving project, based in an area where there are currently a large number of new initiatives. During the course of the project to date there have been many staffing changes with a considerable number of participants in the work, with different and often changing responsibilities. Circumstances change from one week to the next, so that is often difficult to maintain consistency. The work needs to be responsive to this changing and often unpredictable context, and because of this there needs to be realistic expectations of what is feasible.

Each intervention is unique and the setting particular to itself. However, there are also lessons to be learnt that may well be generally applicable. We aim to give enough context to judge how applicable what we say is to other circumstances, and to tease out those findings which may well be of wider significance. This will be undertaken in more detail in the evaluation of the next stage of the project.

Meanwhile, it seems safe to conclude from what we have learned so far that issues central to the functioning of the storysack groups are consistency of staffing, location, including access to crèche facilities, storage and space, and accessible finances. The level of support from the nursery or school and the extent to which the work is seen to be valued is an important and variable factor in a project that spans beyond the individual schools concerned. Storysacks are both valuable in themselves and provide a vehicle for imaginative and original work. Being involved in making and

assembling the sacks has helped raise parents' confidence and self esteem and they have clearly seen the sacks as a powerful learning tool for children. Finally the work opens the door to many possibilities including increased collaboration between school settings, extending parents' lifelong learning and providing an opportunity for continuing professional and paraprofessional development, all of which are likely to continue and develop through the next stages of the storysack project.

References

Anning, A. and Edwards, A. (1999) ***Promoting children's learning from birth to five*** Buckingham: Open University Press

Archer, C. (1998) A multi agency approach to using storysacks ***Basic Skills***, Autumn 1998, pp. 20-21

Bird, V. (2001) Business support for storysacks ***Literacy Today*** No. 26, p.8

Frater, G. (2000) ***Securing boys' literacy: a survey of effective practice in primary schools*** London: Basic Skills Agency

Griffiths, N. (2001) Once upon a time… ***Literacy Today*** No. 26, p.9

Hannon, P. (1995) ***Literacy, home and school: research and practice in teaching literacy with parents.*** London: Falmer Press

Lewis, M., Fisher, R., Grainger, T., Harrison, C. and Hulme, P. (2000) ***Curiosity Kits: non-fiction reading kits*** UKRA Leaflet

Marsh, J. (in press) Parental involvement in literacy development: using media texts ***Journal of Research in Reading***

McGarrigle, S. (2000) Small stories, big impact ***Literacy Today*** No. 24, p.13

Poulson, L., Macleod, F., Bennett, N. and Wray, D. (1997) ***Family Literacy Practice in Local Programmes: an evaluative review of 18 programmes in the Small Grants programme*** London: BSA. Programmes 7 and 8 (pp. 99-101)

Sylva, K. (2000) Early childhood education to ensure a 'fair start' for all in Cox, T. (ed.) ***Combating educational disadvantage*** London: Falmer Press